DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 583 TM 029 939

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TITLE	Portfolios: Will They Endure?
PUB DATE	1999-04-14
NOTE	9p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Costs; Elementary Secondary Education; Language Arts; *Portfolio Assessment; Standardized Tests; Test Construction; *Test Results; Test Use

ABSTRACT

The use of portfolios is a rather recent innovation in teaching the language arts. A characteristic of the portfolio process is that students are led to notice their own progress through the work included in the portfolio. Many educators welcome the portfolio process because they recognize that standardized tests do not tell enough about what students are learning. Portfolios have a definite advantage over testing to assess learner progress since the portfolio process is ongoing and continuous and presents evidence of student progress. Portfolio use might not survive, however, because of weaknesses that include cost, administration difficulties, assessment challenges, and practicality. In many cases, the portfolio does not provide a "score" that is easy for the public to understand. Rubrics have been used to evaluate and score results from a portfolio, but use of a rubric still requires a great deal of interpretation. A major reason why the portfolio may prove to be a fad is the lack of numbers to describe how well students are achieving. (Contains eight references.) (SLD)

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PORTFOLIOS: WILL THEY ENDURE?

A rather recent innovation in teaching the language arts has been to use portfolios to appraise pupil achievement. A philosophy of constructivism is involved in that the learner is actively involved in determining what needs to go into a portfolio. The contents of the portfolio are developed contextually, as products and processes from ongoing lessons and units of study. The teacher is a guide and motivates pupil learning as well as in the preparation of the portfolio. Everyday items of learning from the learner then can become a part of the portfolio. Evaluation then is ongoing and continuous. Portfolios may be compared with standardized, also called norm referenced tests whereby the pupil's results are compared against a norm such as that of other learners locally and nationally. Results from the pupil here are presented numerically, such as percentile rankings, standard deviations, and grade equivalents. Professional test writers write the test items and are external to the local classroom, since they are not connected in any way with pupils taking the test.

State mandated tests also may be used to notice pupil achievement. Generally, statewide testing is done to notice if pupils have achieved measurably stated objectives, developed under the supervision of the state department of education. Learner results may also be stated in terms of percentile ranks, and standard deviations. Teachers are to be held accountable for having high pupil test results. Thus, report cards may be developed in comparing school districts within a state in terms of test results. Comparing each state in the union with others may be done when standardized tests are used.

A few years ago, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) was completed in which the United States was compared internationally in pupil achievement in the two academic disciplines mentioned in the title of this study. Making comparisons emphasizes a competitive approach to education, whereas portfolios stress a pupil making comparisons among his/her own products and processes in education, past and present. Standardized tests and state mandated tests are given at selected interval, such as yearly, grades 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12. Most states give tests less frequently. With portfolios, the evaluation process may occur each day or at diverse intervals within a school day.

Competition Versus Cooperation

Making comparisons among and between individuals, classrooms,

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school districts, states, and nations, represent a competitive approach in determining the quality and quantity of pupil learning. For example, the free enterprise system tends to stress that competition brings out the best within individuals. Through competition then, each person does the best possible in order to succeed in society. This doctrine emphasizes that the playing field is level, and the following do not matter:

1. socio-economic level of the learner.
2. previous opportunities to learn, such as in the community and home setting.
3. the quality of home life and the surrounding environment.
4. racial factors and past discrimination in school and in society.
5. the quality of education received when comparing the lower socio- economic level as compared to suburbia.

Constructivism with a portfolio emphasis realizes that pupils differ in educational opportunities acquired in school, in society, and in situations that affect the child. Thus, it is better to have the individual pupil notice progress over previous efforts and achievements. One standard, such as state mandated objectives for all to achieve, is not realistic. The playing field is anything but level when comparing one pupil with another in terms of achievement academically. Then too, there are other facets of achievement that need to be considered such as social development (Ediger, 1997, 35-38). Constructivism then stresses the following:

1. the pupil being heavily involved in self evaluation, but with teacher assistance.
2. the pupil noticing past as compared to present progress levels when the past is compared with what is now, in terms of products and processes of learning.
3. the pupil with the help of the teacher arranging a portfolio to show what has been learned for parents and other responsible people to observe and to know.
4. the pupil is an individual and also a member of a larger group, indicating his/her achievement in many ways (Ediger, 1996, 14-19).
5. multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1993), and personal learning styles vary from child to child (Dunn and Dunn, 1979, 238-244).

It is quite obvious that numerous factors need to be taken into consideration when pupils are being assessed to determine progress in learning. The competition versus cooperation debate needs to be considered and analyzed in determining the better ways to assess pupil learning and work toward improved teaching and learning situations.

Determination of Pupil Progress

Those stressing competition in motivating teacher and pupil efforts

believe strongly in testing to ascertain achievement. Multiple choice items are used in these tests. State mandated objectives generally have measurable stated objectives that are available to teachers to use as a guide in teaching. At selected intervals, be it grades three six, and ten, for example, learners are tested with a criterion referenced test to show how well pupils did in attaining the specific objectives. The state may issue a report card to show how districts compare one against another in these state mandated objectives.

Testing pupils and their results may be machine scored and results available for statistical purposes. Large numbers of pupils may then be tested and the results machine scored for economic efficiency. This is a way for the state to notice how well pupils are doing in academic achievement. There are cautions here in terms of the multiple choice achievement test that is administered to pupils. These include the following:

1. these tests need to have clearly written test items.
2. the test items are valid in term of pupil needs now as well as in the future (See Ediger, 1996, 219-220).
3. adequate time and attention has been given in writing each item.
4. pilot studies have been run to ascertain the quality of each test item in terms of validity and reliability.
5. weak multiple choice items are eliminated.

These state mandated tests need to be evaluated continuously and updated. They need to cover what has been taught and measure consistently, be it in split/half, test/retest, and/or alternative forms reliability.

Standardized tests have no accompanying objectives and the test results tend to spread pupils out from the first to the ninety-ninth percentile, depending upon the learner's results. These tests are written to make for this spread, which writers have built into the testing instrument to measure pupil achievement. With no accompanying objectives, the teacher is at a loss as to what should be taught so that pupils do well on this type of test. Each pupil's results, however, are compared to a norm as indicated in the manual of the standardized test. When making comparisons, competition among pupils and schools is being emphasized. Many in the business world and selected educators believe that testing and their results bring out the best in achievement within the pupil. Poor quality teaching may then be identified and weeded out. Teachers and administrators need to be held accountable for helping pupils achieve at a level deemed to be appropriate.

When being in high school during the school years of 1942-1946, an illiterate person was an individual who could not read or write, period. Now, if pupils after high school "read only on the seventh grade

level" is looked at with disdain. Actually, individual reading at the seventh grade level do read complicated reading materials. One has only to look at seventh grade content to realize that it has its complexities. The same is true of seventh grade mathematics texts; many individuals would find they truly needed to brush up on mathematics to achieve on the seventh grade level. One news commentator was disgusted with pupils reading only on the tenth grade level upon high school graduation! There is much misunderstanding of standardized test results when a school district wants "everyone to read above the average or mean" of pupils having taken the test. Recently, a university was upset that of their students only half were reading above the mean, based on norms for university students. A proper understanding of statistics would not hurt many people in society. Statistical results in research studies leave a lot of room for disagreement and arguments (See monthly columns by Gerald W. Bracey of the Phi Delta Kappan, (the May 1999 issue being no exception). Arguments and disagreements zero in on the following:

1. how the results are to be interpreted
2. which procedures were used in conducting the study, such as random sampling versus quasi experimental designs, among others.
3. the number of students in the study
4. the duration of the study
5. tests used to measure achievement of pupils in the study.
6. extraneous factors in the study that might produce other results that the ones actually measured
7. biases in the study due to not controlling selected variables
8. lack of validity of the study
9. too much emphasis placed upon reliability to the minimizing of validity in the study
10. internal and external validity lacking (See Ediger, 1997, p. 237).

Those advocating cooperation to improve education in the school setting believe that test scores do not tell enough about what pupils have learned. Daily classroom work of learners is completely ignored when test scores and results have been published. Constructivism stresses that each day pupils in context indicate what has been accomplished. Test results, standardized or state mandated, indicate pupil achievement outside of the contextual daily experiences of pupils.Test results have little to do with performance on the job or in a profession. This does not rule out the use of tests that are well developed and are based on quality research, such as in predictive validity whereby leading tests are used to predict how well a student will do in college, graduate school, and/or in the professions. However, leaning on test results only does put an excessive amount of faith on testing to determine a pupil's

entire future (See Walsh and Betz, 17 and 18). Certainly, there are other indicators of pupil achievement such as daily classroom work and attitudes in society.

Constructivism then emphasizes how well pupils do daily in school, such as in the following in context:

1. comprehension in reading subject matter, silently as well as orally
2. thought processes such as in critical and creative thinking as well as in problem solving
3. written work involving a variety of purposes such as in practical, creative, and narrative writing
4. oral communication skills such as in reports given, discussions participated in, introductions made, and speaking experiences, in general
5. skills in listening effectively, involving oral work, committee endeavors, large group instruction, and peer interactions in the curriculum.
6. social skills such as in working together harmoniously with others in teaching/learning situations, using peer mediation to resolve disputes among children, and stressing cooperation in learning involving teachers and learners
7. moral standards such as caring for others, being sympathetic, advocating democracy in the classroom, and developing feelings of empathy.
8. cleanliness involving washing of hands/faces and helping to keep the classroom clean
9. good human relations among school personnel
10. effective working with parents (See Ediger, 1996, 221-225).

Standardized and criterion referenced tests will not measure in a valid manner most of the above named learnings that are vital to emphasize in the classroom. Multiple choice items also do not lend themselves to assessing oral and written communication.

Why Portfolio Use May Not Survive

Portfolios have a definite advantage over testing to assess learner progress since it is

1. ongoing and continuous
2. provides evidence of pupil progress in products produced and skills stressed
3. democratic in intentions in that the learner has input into what goes into a portfolio
4. presents evidence of improvement over previous pupil attempts to indicate what has been learned

5. qualitative in evaluation and may be used where a numerical does not do justice to show what a pupil has learned.

Weaknesses of portfolio use might well center upon cost, administration, assessment, and practicality. The cost could be high to assess portfolios unless teachers are adequately trained to assist each other in their spare time to serve as assessors. To assess a pupil's portfolio, a team of teachers need to be involved so that interrater/interscorer reliability has merit in the evaluation process. If these evaluators differ much from each other in how a portfolio is assessed, there may be little evidence to understand how good the inherent products and processes truly are. If disinterested persons, meaning objectivity is to be stressed in the total assessment, then external professionals may need to be employed to provide data on the quality of each portfolio. Paying for the assessment could become a big ticket item of expense. Since numerical results to compare individuals, schools, school districts, and states in the nation are not available, will the business world and the news media accept the competed portfolio appraisals? Should the public schools accept the thinking and skepticism of the business world and the news media as not being justifiable? However, the public school is supported by the lay public for revenue to operate in a successful manner. Continuing the many testing programs in the United States is also very costly. Developing tests, administering them to pupils, and using machine scoring of pupil's answers is very costly. When the testing has been completed and test results are available, there is nothing left from these endeavors to buy needed school equipment and supplies, as well as to redo and construct new buildings.

In many cases, the use of portfolios does not provide the test score that is easy to understand for the lay public. In fact, all pupils "should read above grade level" has caused many misunderstandings. "Eliminating the gaps in achievement" among all socio-economic groups has also caused many communications problems. Can this truly be done by schools alone without making many modifications in the distribution of wealth and opportunities for many to succeed in life? With college students piling up huge debts that may take a decade or more to repay, the United States is working against any kind of equally of opportunity in higher education. Receiving the Doctorate in Education in 1963 was the gateway to my becoming professor of education, ending more than thirty years later with an excellent retirement program. Would my obtaining this degree have been possible without the National Defense Education Act of 1958 whereby my debts were reduced by one-half from these loans by teaching five years at a public university? In addition, I paid $4.50 a semester hour for working on and completing the master's degree in school administration, during the 1958-1960 school years. At

that time, there were many teachers and school administrators wondering if they could be without additional college credit at bargain basement prices! I truly felt also that the quality of course work was excellent, be it on the baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral levels.These kinds of aid and assistance encourage, motivate, and boost an individual's chance and opportunity to really contribute to society and develop the self to the fullest possible. Adequate income then needs to be made available to more people of the lower socio-economic levels, in particular.

Administering a portfolio evaluation program may involve extremely much work and effort. The work and effort should be there and available, but problems of getting trained evaluators scheduled to assess the different portfolios may be a major hurdle to clear. Means of reporting the results and in which manner might further complicate a more "subjective" approach, as compared to testing, in providing information on how well pupils are achieving.

To be more "objective," rubrics have been used in evaluating and scoring results from a portfolio. The rubric may contain criteria to rate a pupil on a five point scale as to the quality of the portfolio. However, there is still much interpretation when using the rubric with its five point scale and the related written criteria for each of these levels.
A major reason why the portfolio may be a fad is the lack of numerals to describe how well a pupil is achieving. Test scores do provide the numeral, even though the subjective items on tests were written by human beings. Test writers too need to consider the age old question of "What knowledge is of most worth?' Worthy, relevant knowledge should then become inherent in test items. A further problem is to write each item very clearly so the test taker knows what is wanted in terms of responses. The opportunities to measure higher levels of cognition using multiple choice test items is difficult to come by. Pupils own ideas, thoughts, and feelings can not be placed inside of a multiple choice test. By stressing the ideas, thoughts, and feelings of pupils within a testing situation using multiple choice test items eliminate pupil ownership of the test. Thus, a compromise exists in terms of pupil ownership versus test writer ownership of what goes into each response in evaluation/assessment (See Ediger,1999,3-11).

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